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Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance

Social and human rights questions

Statement submitted by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

This initiative has been undertaken by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) in conjunction with the United Nations, with support from the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation, the International Policy Research Institute, the National Center for PTSD and the National Institutes of Health. Within the United Nations, the Division for Social Policy and Development and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have both given their support and assistance to this project. We have also received support and feedback from staff members of many other divisions and departments.

Objectives

The goal of the International Working Group on Trauma is to foster a collaboration of ISTSS with the Division for Social Policy and Development, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other bodies that deal with issues of traumatic stress. The group was established through a presentation on 6 May 1998 by Dr. Ellen Frey-Wouters, to the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development. In August 1998, in response to his request, Dr. Frey-Wouters provided a preliminary proposal for the establishment of a working group. On 6 October 1998, the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development confirmed the support of the Division for the initiative proposed by the ISTSS, noting that the proposal entailed the preparation of guidelines, including policy guidelines, which could be used by countries seeking to improve their handling of post-traumatic stress. The Division would contribute financially to that task, not least to indicate a recognition of the importance of the issue.

The objective of the Working Group is to develop a document to guide public policy in countries torn by exposure to traumatic events. With problem areas on every continent and with many racial and ethnic groups, there is a need for guidelines aimed at mitigating the effects of traumatic stressors on civilians and the population at large. Similar principles are needed for those who are exposed to the aftermath of

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death and destruction as they perform a wide variety of roles central to the mission of the United Nations.

The Group will generate two products. The first is a book-length publication that will address specific types of traumatic events, along with overviews that address more generic issues. The second is a shorter report, to be submitted to the United Nations, which will address the importance of stress, trauma and mental health issues in intervening in a variety of crises around the world, suggesting principles, examples and guidelines for addressing those concerns. The Group includes representatives from developed and developing countries. The materials will be generic and applicable to the wide range of countries, but the focus will be on those developing countries that do not have many resources to address mental health concerns. We recognize that we must be very sensitive to cultural diversity and spare no effort, as suggested by Graça Machel, to incorporate knowledge and respect for local culture and traditions into our deliberations and final report.

Structure of the Working Group

Leadership has been provided by a Steering Committee of seven members of ISTSS. Eleven subcommittees have been established, each dedicated to a specific area of concern, along with four overview sections on background, conceptualization, intervention principles and a summary of work. The subcommittees are: Social Deprivation; Torture and Organized State Violence; Abuse of the Elderly; Abuse of Children in Peacetime; Victims of Crime; Mentally and Physically Disabled; Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons; Children in Armed Conflict; Disasters; Former Combatants — Soldiers, POWs and Resistance Fighters; and Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Personnel.

Action plan

In January 1999, the Steering Committee began to implement an action plan to produce a final report of the Working Group. A first conference was held at the United Nations on 28 January 1999. A second planning conference followed on 17-18 June and a third, 2-3 February 2000. A number of United Nations personnel attended and contributed greatly to the discussion, and many continue to participate in the preparation of the final products.

Conclusion

In closing, let us express our excitement about this collaboration between ISTSS and the United Nations. The members of the subcommittees have considerable field experience (often under the United Nations aegis). It is our intention to develop a feasible and effective strategy that can be readily integrated and implemented within existing United Nations programmes, structures, processes and guidelines. We hope that our recommendations concerning traumatic stress and a mental health perspective are truly useful and applicable to the United Nations missions, to United Nations personnel and to the many people who require and receive United Nations services. We see this as a first step towards a broader collaboration with the United Nations in these areas.